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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003577

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SUBJECT: TFLE01: SYRIA DAILY SITREP 05 FOR THURSDAY, JULY 20, 2006

REF: STATE 117016

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (S) Summary: On July 20, Syria's President Bashar al-Asad met with Russian Middle East envoy Saltanov and, separately, called Turkish PM Erdogan to discuss the Israel-Hizballah conflict, according to media reports. The Ba'ath party's most important policy-making body met for the third consecutive day July 19 and called for the mobilization of popular support and donations to "the Lebanese brothers with the aim of boosting their steadfastness in facing the Israeli enemy machine and its criminal war," official Syrian media reported. On July 19, the Charge delivered a demarche to Syrian MFA Protocol Director Amir Smadi, stressing the SARG's responsibility to ensure the safe and successful evacuation of Americans from Lebanon. Smadi responded that Syria was fully aware of the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon and was doing all it could to assist those fleeing the conflict. The Consular Section received on July 19 an estimated 200 walk-in requests for American Citizen Services (ACS), similar to the previous day. The SARG and the Syrian private sector were organizing to provide housing and other assistance to those displaced from Lebanon, while reports were emerging of profiteering in the hotel and transportation sectors. End Summary.

POLITICAL/MILITARY

12. (SBU) The following is an update of political/military issues:

-- Russia's Middle East Envoy and Deputy FM Alexander Saltanov met July 20 with Syrian President Asad to discuss the Israel-Hizballah conflict, according to regional media. Saltanov met July 19 with Syria's FM Walid Mu'allim, with talks focusing on the situation in the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon and ways to broker a cease-fire, according to the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). Saltanov arrived in Syria from Jordan.

-- Syria's President Asad called Turkish PM Erdogan July 20 to discuss the Israel-Hizballah conflict and "the slow-down of the international community to impose a cease-fire and an end to the crisis," according to SANA.

-- The Ba'ath Party's most important policy-making body, the Regional Command, met for the third consecutive day July 19, calling for the formation of a committee to mobilize popular support and donations to "the Lebanese brothers with the aim of boosting their steadfastness in facing the Israeli enemy machine and its criminal war," SANA reported.

-- Syria's Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha told U.S. News in a July 19 interview that Syria rejected U.S. and Israeli assertions that Syria has been supplying Hizballah with rockets or financial support. Mustapha said that Hizballah was "an independent, autonomous organization," and that Syria is a political supporter of such "national liberation" movements such as Hizballah.

-- The DAO and RSO reported that a group of about 100 women carrying candles approached the U.S. Embassy at around 1930 July 19 in what appeared to be a vigil or demonstration. Syrian security kept the group under control until it moved away from the Embassy after a short time. Another demonstration was scheduled the evening of July 20 in downtown Damascus, jointly organized by an organization to support the Lebanese "resistance," Manar TV, and the Syrian Students Union.

CONSULAR

13. (S) The following is an update of consular issues:

-- In response to reftel, the Charge delivered on July 19 the demarche to the Syrian MFA's Protocol Director stressing that the SARG must take all possible measures to ensure the safe and successful evacuation of Americans from Lebanon. Smadi responded that Syria was fully aware of the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, that it was facilitating the entry of those fleeing, and that it was providing relief for tens of thousands of displaced persons "regardless of nationality." Additionally, Smadi noted that the SARG was running its three international airports at full capacity to allow displaced persons to leave as quickly as possible.

DAMASCUS 00003577 002 OF 002

14. (SBU) Additionally:

-- The Consular Section received on July 19 an estimated 200 walk-in requests for American Citizen Services (ACS), similar to the previous day.

-- Calls from American citizens in Lebanon were focused on how to join the boat lift from Lebanon, although many people were still seeking information about how to evacuate themselves by road through Syria.

-- The Consular Section has not disbursed any repatriation funds. It processed one Overseas Citizen Services trust on July 19.

-- A Canadian diplomat spent July 17 and 18 on the northern border crossing of al-Arida between Syria and Lebanon, noting that immigration officials are able to process a maximum of 3,000-5,000 departures per day. Unconfirmed estimates of the number of total departures from Lebanon since the start of the crisis are: up to 50,000 Lebanese nationals, up to 100,000 Arab foreigners and between 10,000-20,000 other foreigners, according to the diplomat.

-- Reports indicate that commercial carriers out of Damascus are fully booked through the end of the month, but airlines have been adding new flights as possible or reconfiguring existing flights to accommodate more passengers. Separately, Lebanon's national airline carrier, Middle East Airlines, announced it would resume international flights out of Damascus International Airport after the destruction of the Beirut airport, according to regional media.

ECONOMIC

15. (SBU) The following is an update of economic issues:

-- The public and private sectors continued to organize themselves to provide housing and other assistance to those

displaced from Lebanon, according to several business contacts. Several companies have teamed up with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to organize a call center that processed 4,000 calls and found housing for 600 people in the first 24 hours of operation.

-- There were increasing reports of profiteering, particularly in the hotel and bussing sectors, according to business contacts.

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